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## Post-COVID-19 Rooms of Our Own: Lessons Learned from Virtual Professional Development Projects Designed for Early Childhood Educators in Ontario

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*Post-COVID-19 Własne pokoje: Wnioski wyciągnięte z wirtualnych projektów rozwoju zawodowego przeznaczonych dla nauczycieli wczesnego dzieciństwa w Ontario*

**Abstract:** This paper reflects and explores lessons learned during two professional learning series related to the pedagogical practices of early childhood educators (ECEs) in Ontario, Canada. Drawing on a comparative analysis of our observations, collaborative inquiries, and discussions, we underline post-COVID-19 conditions that change how we think, engage, and envision possibilities in professional learning. We discuss the way the use of technology at the intersection of time and space and carefully chosen pedagogical approaches pushed us to reconsider current practices used in the design of professional learning activities, the implementation, and the responses to educators' learning. We focus on the way technology helped us envision and plan for virtual rooms as environments as third teachers. Trading the traditional professional workshop-like activities with fixed time boundaries for virtual café-style learning, introducing design thinking, distributed leadership, indigenous world views, and rhizomatic wonderings, we discuss our decisions to change the directions of professional learning from focusing on skill development and transmission of knowledge to enhancing dispositions needed to become lifelong learners, innovators,

and advocates. We conclude the paper with invitations and provocations for educators, academics, researchers, and regulatory bodies to further discuss professional learning activities for the early childhood education (ECE) community in Ontario. In brief, we focus on removing the dividing practices between professional learning activities and pedagogical approaches as a starting point to envision possibilities in Ontario's ECE field.

**Keywords:** professional learning; continuous professional learning; technology; early childhood education; dialogic learning

**Abstrakt:** Autorzy prezentują i analizują wnioski wyciągnięte podczas dwóch serii szkoleń zawodowych związanych z praktykami pedagogicznymi nauczycieli wczesnego dzieciństwa (ECE) w Ontario w Kanadzie. Opierając się na analizie porównawczej przeprowadzonych obserwacji, wspólnych dociekań i dyskusji, podkreślono warunki po pandemii COVID-19, które zmieniają sposób myślenia, angażowania się i wyobrażania sobie możliwości w profesjonalnym uczeniu się. Ponadto omówiono sposób, w jaki wykorzystanie technologii w czasie i przestrzeni oraz starannie dobrane podejścia pedagogiczne zmusiły specjalistów do ponownego rozważenia obecnych praktyk stosowanych w projektowaniu profesjonalnych działań edukacyjnych, wdrażania i reagowania na uczenie się nauczycieli. Skupiono się na sposobie, w jaki technologia pomogła nauczycielom wyobrazić sobie i zaplanować wirtualne pokoje. Zamieniając tradycyjne profesjonalne zajęcia warsztatowe z ustalonymi granicami czasowymi na naukę w stylu wirtualnej kawiarni, wprowadzając myślenie projektowe, rozproszone przywództwo, rdzenne światopoglądy i rizomatyczne refleksje, autorzy omawiają decyzje dotyczące zmiany kierunków profesjonalnego uczenia się z koncentrowania się na rozwoju umiejętności i przekazywaniu wiedzy na wzmacnianie dyspozycji potrzebnych do uczenia się przez całe życie, innowatorów i rzeczników. Artykuł zakończony został zaproszeniami i prowokacjami dla nauczycieli, pracowników akademickich, badaczy i organów regulacyjnych do dalszej dyskusji na temat profesjonalnych działań edukacyjnych dla społeczności wczesnej edukacji w Ontario. Krótko mówiąc, autorzy skoncentrowali się na usuwaniu podziałów między profesjonalnymi działaniami edukacyjnymi a podejściami pedagogicznymi jako punktem wyjścia do wyobrażenia sobie możliwości w dziedzinie wczesnej edukacji w Ontario.

**Słowa kluczowe:** kształcenie zawodowe; ustawiczne uczenie się zawodowe; technologia; wczesna edukacja; uczenie się dialogiczne

## INTRODUCTION

The commonly used approaches to professional learning in the ECE field in Ontario became a subject of debate from the time the College of Early Childhood Educators (the College) made Continuous Professional Learning (CPL) a part of professional regulations under the Code of Ethics and Standards of Practice (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017a). From that time on, more than 50,000 ECEs needed innovative ways to continuously “reflect on their practice, professional growth and leadership development within the context of their ethical and professional standards” (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017a, p. 5). This decision motivated professional learning providers to rethink the way educators strengthen their skills, knowledge, and dispositions to fulfill the College's requirements. We have started to see new perspectives and professional development opportunities attempting to connect educators' learning with CPL.

The CPL requirements themselves are structured to encourage ECEs to enhance their professional capacity not only from lecture-style workshops but through activities like joining communities of practice, professional practice discussions, ad-

vocacy, mentoring or coaching, collaborative research or case study analysis, and discussions (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2022). The College started to encourage its members to engage in learning through collaborative inquiry as a collective action of questioning “theory and practice, discuss[ing] ideas, test[ing] theories and share[ing] learning” (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017b, p. 2). This is an innovative approach from a professional college, as it invites the enhancement of professional competencies through the critical and active practice of contributing to “creat[ing] professional change” (College of Early Childhood Educators, 2017b, p. 3). From this understanding, it seems that the College started to encourage educators to learn through CPL with three concepts that are also promoted widely in learning for children: professional learning (enhancement of their dispositions in becoming lifelong learners), problem-based learning (where complex issues and challenges become learning opportunities), and professional collaboration (where we highlight the importance of local expertise). Ontario schools recognize and promote all three areas to create a rich context for children to enhance their 21<sup>st</sup>-century, self-directed learning and transferable skills. This is particularly important, as it is also consistent with the push of an array of ideas promoted in the *How Does Learning Happen?* document (Ministry of Education, 2014) that guides pedagogical practices in all licenced programs for young children in Ontario.

Although we agree with the many scholars who critique the meddling of professionalization in education (e.g. Molla, Nolan, 2019; Osmond-Johnson, 2018; Phelan, Vintimilla, 2020; Roberts-Holmes, Moss, 2021), we believe that the push and invitations (as we prefer to see them) from the College to think differently about professional learning are progressive. We feel that such decisions have the potential to help the ECE community in Ontario break through the old habits of professional learning as a form of strictly transferring and preserving ideas that we already know, and as a way of strengthening ECEs’ obedient adherence to *safe* policies and procedures. Most importantly, as mentioned, we hope that the unintentional effects of the College’s decisions to promote lifelong learning skills may open a space for educators, researchers, and academics to engage in deeper discussion, research, and various explorations of the topic, which, in turn, might make possible ECEs discovering their voice and power in the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

## METHODS

The two professional learning series used for exploration in this paper were organized due to the CAD 113.3 million Workforce Funding for the ECE community in 2022 and 2023. This one-time funding from the federal government was intended to support early learning programs for young children with the reten-

tion and recruitment of highly qualified educators (Ministry of Education, 2021). Therefore, many municipalities invested most of the funding in professional learning activities, including training related to pedagogy and curriculum, professional networking, mentoring and coaching, and providing scholarships for domestic students in ECE programs at community colleges.

We were invited to design and implement a few professional learning activities. We recommended that these activities be series as opposed to one-off sessions, to give time for building community and creating safe spaces. We have chosen two of them for exploration, as they encompass collaborative learning for leaders and managers, educators, and ECE students. The objectives of our first professional learning series were to support collaboration and innovation in educators' pedagogical leadership and CPL. We focused on changing the current pedagogical practices and professional learning culture through empowerment and collaboration through a non-conventional relationship between leaders and educators and by prioritizing the involvement of pre-service ECE students, who are typically not invited to professional development for ECEs. We aimed to challenge dominant discourses of hierarchical and administrative leadership traditions. These sessions were about enhancing critical reflection and collaborative inquiry. We created spaces for increasing understanding of distributed leadership and joint action in leading pedagogy. We promoted democratic values, so all views were included in planning, implementing, and evaluating practices, inviting all people from the typical early learning and care hierarchy.

These sessions were based on the premise that educators, alongside supervisors, managers, and operators, are best suited to transform their pedagogies and ways of professional learning. We wanted to communicate that a collaborative effort is required to change practices, challenge existing workplace cultures, and promote innovation in professional learning.

The second series in particular was designed to respond to some of the issues that contributed to Ontario's shortage of ECEs (as described in McCuaig et al., 2022). We promoted mentoring practices as conditions for mutual learning. Specifically, we encouraged some of the principles of co-mentoring, collaborative mentoring, group mentoring, and dialogical mentoring to help educators influence the culture of workplaces and professional development. Educators and ECE students have met biweekly to reflect upon their pedagogical practices and the underlying values that support them.

Throughout the design and implementation of both projects, we drew on relevant research that suggests a close connection between:

- educators' well-being and the provision of more favourable conditions for children's learning (Carroll et al., 2021),
- a sense of accomplishment related to professional growth and transformation of professional communities (workplace well-being) (Moratti, 2018; Pyhältö et al., 2015), and

- collaboration and networking among educators and positive mental health outcomes (Cumming, 2017; Jones et al., 2019; Jones et al., 2020).

The process of delivering and engaging in both series was important to us. Reminded by Dahlberg et al. (1999) that we do not make meaning just by observing but rather by constructing it in an interactive, responsive, and reciprocal exchange with others, we wanted to ensure that all the participants will find a way to enter a conversation and contribute to the discussions. Therefore, we have frequently been reflecting on the group discussions and choosing various reading materials, resources, and learning approaches to respond to the group's emerging interests and creating an inviting and inclusive space for all.

Table 1. Approaches and intentions

Some of the approaches and intentions used in both projects in response to educators' learning	
Creating space and time for dialogue and knowledge exchange	To acknowledge the value of time provision for building relationships and community
Encouraging educators to choose their own topics and ideas for exploration	To empower educators in assuming self-directed learning
Introducing children's literature as analogies for our work	To leverage the powerful meanings embedded in stories and apply them to our practice
Introducing rhizomatic learning	To acknowledge the influence of welcoming and valuing everyone's contribution and highlighting the richness of our diversity in thoughts
Introducing the principles of design thinking	To support educators considering innovating solutions to their challenges
Introducing Actor-Network Theory	To acknowledge how material objects influence our practices and ways we conceptualize them (including technology)
Introducing reflection with critical and feminist lenses	To support educators in their self-awareness of the importance of the work they do, in contrast with how society and governments value it (image of the educator)
Introducing Indigenous views on leadership and collaboration	To promote collective responsibility for promoting local expertise and to honour our duty to Canada's Calls to Action; Education for Reconciliation (Truth and Reconciliation Commission of Canada, 2015)
Writing proposals and participating in conferences	To encourage advocacy and activism
Writing an article for publication	To encourage knowledge exchange as an important part of ECEs' work. To encourage ECEs to see that academic work is everyone's work (democratic?)

Source: Authors' own study.

## TECHNOLOGY AND LEARNING

Inspired by Haraway's invitation that "it matters which stories tell stories, which concepts think concepts. Mathematically, visually, and narratively, it matters which figures figure figures, which systems systematize systems" (2015, p. 160), we decided to include technology and learning through discussions in our conversation of telling professional learning's story. It is not that we were looking to tell a story that will be complete, with a good ending, and replace the current ones, but rather we were aiming to create space for the technologies to help us start a story of possibilities. The decision was made after the first meetings, when the educators and students spoke about how the use of technology shaped their practices and professional learning. Thus, technology becomes a third teacher, but what kind of teacher?

We chose Zoom as the platform for our meetings, as we surmised that educators were familiar with it because it is widely used in education. We have also used Zoom because research suggests that participants adapt easily to the features and create favourable conditions to learn through discussions (Kohnke, Moorhouse, 2022). We have also used other tech tools, such as Google documents for gathering ideas, questions, and suggestions; the game-based Kahoot platform, as we learned that educators' participation increases in a more competitive and jocular approach; and short videos, to support exploring a topic during and outside meetings

Because we believe that learning is a creative process, we have constructed our meetings on the Zoom platform with no fixed outcomes and based on providing plenty of space for dialogic learning. The reason is that dialogic learning is considered "the process of co-creative construction of knowledge (epistemological focus), whereas engagement in dialogue is a way to change ourselves and to change our reality (ontological focus)" (Korsgaard Sorensen, 2022, p. 43). Furthermore, despite being the main decision-makers in responding to emerging topics and areas of focus throughout the project, we wanted to create a space and time for negotiation where ideas, concepts, and knowledge flow from the participants themselves. Korsgaard Sorensen eloquently describes such a space:

The collaborative dialogue space is where the democratic "play of learning" comes into existence through a tapestry of dialogue. The dialogue process allows for democratic attitudes of D-CKB [a digital collaborative knowledge building] to develop in learners through a learning architecture that invites meta-learning (awareness of learning through metafora), related to mutual exploration of issues, mutual examination of arguments, agreements and disagreements, mutual questioning of positions, dynamic interaction, weaving of ideas, convergence of perspectives and synthesis of ideas. (2022, p. 47)

## COMPARATIVE ANALYSIS

Our inquiry was structured on the way technology can help us think of possibilities in professional learning. We met regularly after each meeting to compare our notes and observations and to discuss possible relations between participants' engagement in meetings and our methods (the pedagogical approaches we used). We also aimed to uncover areas for further research related to professional learning in ECE. We chose comparative analysis for the project, as it is suggested that starting with a comparison of views leading to the analytical discussion may help with a deeper understanding of a phenomenon or perspective (Calandra, 2021). To create a ground for comparison and conversing about our perspectives, we chose the following four themes:

- discussions as learning in online meetings (how educators engage in discussions during our gatherings),
- use of technology in pedagogy (how educators speak about technology in their daily practices and its effect on their understanding of pedagogical approaches,
- various views and perspectives on practice (how educators think with the approaches/intentions/provocations we have introduced), and
- digital spaces as a third teacher (how we considered the virtual space we have created as the third teacher).

## FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our findings and discussion are organized on the four themes.

### DISCUSSIONS AS LEARNING IN ONLINE MEETINGS

We have observed that many educators were engaged in discussions if the topic was related to their experiences. They often discussed their duties and responsibilities rather than pedagogical practices. Furthermore, they often referred to the way they are overwhelmed with those duties and how they are taking so much of their time away from their interactions with children and families. Although most educators acknowledged the importance of learning, they focused their discussions on highlighting their busy schedules and not being able to change anything, as policies and rules restrict them. Educators did not discuss their professional learning activities in relation to their challenges.

Conversely, the students in our project were curious about all the new topics they encountered, including the intellectually challenging ones. They quite easily

initiated discussions, held the discussions for a long time, and offered their positions to the complex ideas presented in our meetings. They quite comfortably questioned the implications of the new knowledge on their pedagogy.

This is an important observation to be highlighted here, as it points out that something is happening to educators' intellectual curiosity and the dispositions required for lifelong learning. The students have it; the educators seemed to have had it taken away like the languages Malaguzzi (n.d.) purported were stolen from wondering children. Such practices of not nurturing intellectual curiosity in educators may have a huge effect on the future of the profession and the ways educators learn through CPL. The reason is that, as suggested by Baxter Magolda and Magolda, knowing yourself as teachers and learners, as well as being intellectually curious, is essential for "the ability to access, integrate, and apply multiple sources of knowledge; and the capacity to continually reflect on the intersections of knowledge and action" (2011, p. 5). For the profession to flourish, it is important that educators use their intellectual curiosity to create and explore new possibilities to solve their professional challenges.

## USE OF TECHNOLOGY IN PROFESSIONAL LEARNING AND PEDAGOGY

During our meetings, we observed many educators having challenges accessing reliable internet and computers with working microphones and cameras. We also observed participants having difficulties navigating the platforms and using the various features, from setting up a camera to accessing a link posted in a chat area. This is consistent with a study conducted with school teachers in India who struggled during the transition to online pedagogy during COVID-19. They have identified interruptions of the Internet as one of the biggest challenges during this transition as well as limited technological / digital literacy (Singh et al., 2022). Unlike our ECEs, the Indian teachers were provided with professional learning activities organized by the local State Education Board with the support of the Khan Academy. The intention was to support teachers with the enhancement of their capacity in the use of technology in education (Singh et al., 2022).

The second area that we observed is that many educators and students had no access to a quiet space to participate in our discussions. In the evening sessions, some educators balanced their home responsibilities, such as frequently attending to their small children, or joined from the relative privacy of the family car. In the morning sessions, many participants were doing other tasks (such as answering phones) and responding to inquiries in child care offices while engaging in discussions with the group. Educators consistently spoke about how they do not have time to participate in learning or professional learning activities and that most of

them are offered after working hours. This may be why they acknowledged that learning online is convenient and provides great opportunities for professional networking. These experiences evoke Virginia Woolf's (2020) famous argument in *A Room of One's Own*. Indian scholar Aditi Behl makes the connection, "[t]hrough *A Room of One's Own*, Woolf has potently suggested that women have lacked agency because they have been denied free access to space" (2020, p. 129). It has also been suggested that technology emancipates those who find the room Woolf suggested within its walls: "I have argued for the 'room' being an unlimited realm, with 'infinite space to maneuver,' but perhaps this idea is only externally applicable after the creation of the Internet, which allows hypertext and hyper-reality to coexist with text and reality" (Sheikh, 2018, p. 29).

Educators and students generally spoke about using limited technology tools in their pedagogical practice and field practicum. Taking pictures and documenting children's activities to be sent to families was the most discussed area of concern for both the students and educators. Both groups expressed, almost laughably, that those practices are focused on pleasing families and making them believe that their children are being provided with fun and enjoyable learning opportunities. In fact, the documentation of activities sent to families is not the activity children were interested in or wanted to pursue. However, the practice was promoted by centres because parents often question educators if they do not receive those pictures.

From our observations, we found that educators do not discuss using technology for self-directed professional learning. They use it for professional activities organized by their workplaces and browse the internet / social media for ideas about activities. In this respect, technology is less a vehicle for pedagogy than it is a technician's tool and a leech on the educators' autonomy and creativity.

## VARIOUS VIEWS AND PERSPECTIVES ON PRACTICE

We have noticed that educators in our sessions did not talk about using theories to inform their practice or that they spent time reading about research involving current issues in ECE. In fact, we have difficulty motivating educators to read materials outside the meetings. This seems to be consistent with the research conducted by Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2022) on professional development that promotes educators' learning through critical reflection and pedagogical action. In their study, almost half of the participants admitted to not reading or reflecting on the implication of research on their practice.

In our sessions, it was often the ECE students who took the leading role in the discussion and deeper exploration of the ideas, concepts, and theories that we brought as provocations to the meetings. While building on their field practicum

experiences, they successfully made many connections to their daily pedagogical practices and collaborative wonderings with their mentors. The students in particular started to explore and quickly agreed to participate in a conference and share their practicum experiences with a panel at the College. They effectively used Actor-Network Theory in explaining daily practices. They also used the theory to discuss their reflection on how much of their own creativity, curiosity, and gifts they need to sacrifice to fit into the established network of many agents in the current ECE field.

We have observed that educators in particular enjoyed the exploration of resources associated with Indigenous knowledge and other fields. We also agreed that discussions on design thinking were especially helpful in breaking through some of the strong views on being unable to change anything in the current system. The exploration of seeing leadership as collective responsibility for the community seems to be the idea that educators not only most often referred to but also spoke about implementing in their practices. We also observed that by reflecting to the supervisors and educators that their interdependence rather than their independence was a strength, it was received as a welcome and celebrated revelation.

### DIGITAL SPACES AS A THIRD TEACHER

The COVID-19 pandemic has introduced us to various technological advancements that have significantly affected professional learning activities. Among these, we have been forced to rethink digital communities, communication, and collaboration. One of the biggest advantages of this shift has been the increased equity and inclusivity that it has brought, especially for women in ECE. Digital platforms have made it easier for educators to join and connect with their peers, without the traditional barriers of balancing travel time, expenses, and childcare. However, it has also highlighted the hierarchical structures that exist within households, women often participating in these activities solely through their phones, limiting their experience. Additionally, there are generational differences in comfort and familiarity with technology that must be taken into account.

Regarding the daytime virtual gatherings and invitations to think together, the office computer seems to be already an established part of this normalized busyness of the neo-liberal, efficient and obedient model of keeping families happy and creating “quality” care. In contrast, the same portable office computer creates a paradox due to being seen as a door to a different environment, one of reflection and intellectual nurturance. Some of our participants, despite the fact they were balancing other tasks while joining our sessions, were engaging in deep discussions and were even resisting and challenging some of the present practices. The

use of motion-detection cameras, ability to work from home, from outdoor places, or even while driving open possibilities for connecting with others and discussing ideas important to them. The abundance of digital tools and media made possible the sharing of research, stories, ideas, emotions, questions, and challenges in ways that could engage the diverse needs of all participants. The entanglement of the use of technology, our pedagogical decisions, and participants' choices created an environment for co-learning, negotiating, and communicating values, beliefs, assumptions and purposes.

## IMPLICATIONS FOR PRACTICE

We invite educators, academics, and researchers to explore the topic more systematically to shed light on conditions that could support educators in developing dispositions needed to become lifelong learners and to perhaps identify and eliminate practices that steal the gifts of curiosity and creativity with which new ECEs arrive in the profession.

We also call on organizations that marshal and financially support professional learning activities for educators to promote a more reciprocal approach to learning rather than workshops that promote one way of learning and focus on a cookie-cutter approach to pedagogical practices.

We invite educators to resist many of the current professional learning approaches that question the ability and capacity of educators through the way they are constructed. Paying attention to the process of the way educators learn can help shift the notion that educators need to be told what to do and that the information has to be presented simply, as they are incapable of complex thinking.

We invite professional learning designers and providers to align the opportunities with pedagogical practices promoted in the *How Does Learning Happen?* document (Ministry of Education, 2014). This provocation may help educators enhance their understanding and dispositions of practices that encourage innovation, curiosity, and creativity. The study conducted in British Columbia by Pacini-Ketchabaw et al. (2022) highlighted that educators noticed the value of linking ideas associated with critical theories and their daily practice in the classroom. We further recommend connecting professional learning methodology with pedagogical approaches that educators may use in their work with children. If we are to promote intellectual curiosity and dispositions needed for lifelong learning with children, educators must become learners and intellectually curious practitioners.

We suggest that technology be used more often for educators to create professional networking groups and flexibility of learning. We suggest that technology that often dictates busy work be the tool to open a door to a different space,

one where the educator is not an expert or a manager but connected to others as co-learners; a room to challenge, to take risks, to resist, and come up with questions instead of answers. Further, since technology can help bridge the barriers of time and space for professional learning, incorporating asynchronous components can help educators study during the most suitable time for them. Through the provision of technological tools and paid time, educators should be motivated and encouraged to read theory and research and prepare to discuss it in collaborative meetings, making technology a third and generative teacher.

## CONCLUSIONS

As it has in many other professions, COVID-19 opened the doors to technology as a liberating tool crossing barriers of time and space. Through our two series of café-style virtual gatherings, we were able to learn new ways of connecting, empowering, and inspiring ECEs in Ontario. Regularly scheduled virtual time and space together allowed for the sharing of new and new-to-us ways of framing problems, design thinking, Indigenous world views, distributed leadership, rhizomatic thought, and Actor-Network Theory, and through different media, such as videos, shared reading of research, and children's literature. The virtual space that has room for seasoned leaders, students, and parents, as well as educators, became a safe and welcoming place. It created room to enhance the dispositions needed to nurture lifelong learning in an undervalued and holistically demanding profession, some members being moved to advocate and use their voices to share at conferences, at post-secondary institutions, at governing bodies, and through social media. This fluid yet structured technique of bringing together professional learning practices and pedagogical approaches, needs more study but offers those providing professional learning with starting place from which to grow.

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